

The Good Ayatollahs

THE FAILURE OF POLITICAL ISLAM. BY OLIVIER ROY. TRANSLATED BY CAROL VOLK. *Harvard*. 238 pp. \$22.95.

Reviewed by Daniel Pipes

FOR decades, "the Middle East conflict" has referred to the Arab-Israeli confrontation. But now the central conflict of the region seems at least equally to concern fundamentalist Islam: will it manage to take over, or will the mostly nonfundamentalist autocrats in the Arab and Muslim world remain in power?

The question has enormously important implications, primarily for the Muslims involved but also for Israel and the United States. Should the fundamentalists win, the Middle East will be in for a long dark era. Weapons of mass destruction will proliferate; warfare will become more common; economies will contract. All-out hostility with Israel will again be likely. Americans will be targeted for terrorism and other violence.

The fundamentalists could well take over several governments within a short time. In Algeria, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) has launched a virtual civil war. In Egypt, radical fundamentalists control parts of the cities and countryside. Fundamentalist parties have done impressively well in nearly all the Muslim countries with electoral politics (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Pakistan, Malaysia). By any measure, the fundamentalist challenge to the established order is growing, and much of the Muslim world is currently at risk.

The title of this book therefore comes as something of a surprise. Political Islam a failure? Since Olivier Roy, a leading French analyst of Islam, knows all about what is going on in the Muslim world,

"failure" must have a special meaning for him. And indeed, the failure he alludes to follows from an elaborate argument, one that distinguishes between something called Islamism and something called neofundamentalism.

For Roy, the former entails a drive for political power, while the latter signifies only a focus on the family and the mosque. In Roy's view, neofundamentalism represents a "watering down" of Islamism. Instead of taking over the state, neofundamentalists concentrate on creating their own miniature versions of the just society; the challenge they pose to "the political, economic, and social realms" is a challenge not in deeds but "only in words."

This is where the "failure" comes in. For outside of Iran itself, according to Roy, Islamism has faltered and the weaker cause of neofundamentalism has flourished. And this is a salutary thing:

It marks the streets and customs but has no power relationship in the Middle East. It does not

influence either state borders or interests. It has not created a "third force" in the world. It has not even been able to offer the Muslim masses a concrete political expression for their anticolonialism.

In brief, the challenge of fundamentalist Islam has been overrated, and "the Islamic revolution is behind us." This is so even in Iran; "the Teheran of the mullahs," Roy asserts in an astonishing passage, "has a very American look." Should it stagger to power elsewhere, fundamentalism "would produce only superficial changes in customs and law." Nor does it pose any great challenge to the West. It "is not a geostrategic factor: it will neither unify the Muslim world nor change the balance of power in the Middle East."

ROY is a very knowledgeable student of Islam, even a brilliant one, and his well-translated book is replete with fine insights and memorable epigrams. (My favorite: "There are happy Muslims;

Commentary

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there are no happy Islamists.") His analysis, moreover, contains kernels of truth. He is right to note, for example, that contrary to the usual assumption, fundamentalist Islam is a form of modernization. In Roy's elegant paraphrase of Lenin on Soviet Communism, it is "the *sharia* [Islamic sacred law] plus electricity."

Roy also makes the valid point that fundamentalist Islam of either the Islamist or the "neo-" variety cannot work: there is no possibility that its program will serve Muslims well, or that they will stick with it over the long haul. As Muslims recognize fundamentalism to be dysfunctional, they will abandon it.

But when will this happen? The realization that fundamentalism does not work could be years or decades hence, and in the meantime Islamic regimes can do a great deal of damage both to their own populace and to the rest of the world. The mullahs in Iran have tasted power and appear to like it; they will make great efforts to retain control of their country, not to mention expanding their influence outward. (As for Teheran having "a very American" look, check the next photograph of that city that appears in your newspaper.)

This takes us to what is stunningly wrong-headed about Roy's central thesis concerning the failure of fundamentalist Islam. He seems to assume that because fundamentalists have not yet swept the Muslim world, they cannot do so in the future. This is comparable to an analyst's looking around in 1933, sixteen years after the Bolshevik Revolution, and deciding that because Communism had as yet come to power in only two

countries (Mongolia being the second), and was not living up to its socialist ideals even there, it followed that "the revolution is behind us." Today, sixteen years after the Iranian revolution, Roy has come to a no less profoundly mistaken conclusion.

Indeed, Roy has already been proved wrong. The original French version of *The Failure of Political Islam* appeared in October 1992. In it, Roy predicted that if the FIS should reach power in Algeria and displace the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN), it would "not invent a new society . . . the FIS's Algeria will do nothing more than place a *chador* [women's head-dress] over the FLN's Algeria."

Well, three years have passed, and the FIS is already yesterday's organization, having been surpassed by the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). As its name implies, the GIA is no gentle band of preachers urging moral self-improvement but a deadly gang of murderers who specialize in killing children of police officers, women without veils, unsympathetic journalists, and non-Muslim foreigners. Their preferred methods are particularly horrifying; they specialize in slitting throats and cutting off heads.

As in Cambodia, where the Khmer Rouge attacked everyone educated and Western-oriented, so in Algeria today anyone speaking French or wearing a business suit is a potential victim. The scale of carnage in Algeria may well end up making the revolution in Iran seem like child's play.

SO MUCH, then, for the taming of fundamentalism. Which raises the

question: how can someone who knows so much be so wrong?

For one thing, Roy writes in the French tradition of intellectual virtuosity—taking an implausible point and making a brilliant argument for it. He also indulges in the favorite intellectual pastime of scandalizing the middle class. As fears of fundamentalist Islam are particularly severe in France these days, he must insist on their being illusory.

But whatever French games Roy may be playing, his book is politically significant here in the United States. Enlightened American opinion already tells us not to worry about fundamentalist Islam. Leading American specialists—they include John Entelis, John Esposito, and John Voll—argue that beyond the rough edges and bristling rhetoric is a movement that is democratic in spirit, capitalist in orientation, and prepared to coexist with the West. Roy adds fuel to this fantasy by assuring us that fundamentalist Islam has degenerated into a quietist movement seeking to create nothing more than "authentically Muslim micro-societies."

Unfortunately, Roy and his ilk have the ear of our policy-makers, for at least when it comes to Algeria (less so in the case of Egypt and Iran) the U.S. has conspicuously refrained from condemning the fundamentalists' ideas and goals. Instead, it seeks them out to engage in dialogue. As Algeria stands today on the threshold of becoming the last great tragedy of the 20th century, it is deeply distressing that leading scholars and intellectuals are finding ways, yet again, to lull the West with false hopes.